

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE PORTFOLIO

Marygrace Anderson

The Ohio State University

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	3
CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS IN ART EDUCATION.....	11
CHAPTER 3: TEACHING MEANING IN ARTMAKING.....	30
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION.....	47
REFERENCES.....	53

CHAPTER 1:  
INTRODUCTION

## **Introduction**

Occasionally during my career, students have asked, “When did you know you wanted to be an art teacher?” My answer is not until my sophomore year of college. Going into college, I knew that I wanted to do something with art but was not really sure what that would be. It wasn’t until I had taken several art history courses in that the idea presented itself. I have always felt that as long as you do your best at something, opportunities present themselves. Looking back, I would say that has been very true of my life and career as an art teacher.

I graduated from Kutztown University of Pennsylvania with a BFA in Drawing in 1994 and a BS in Art Education in 1995. My student teaching included time at an all-girls Catholic school in Plymouth, England. After traveling for several months, I returned home and began teaching in my home school district in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania in the fall of 1995. My first job was teaching photography and animation. It was here that I met my husband Eric who is an English teacher. I taught in East Stroudsburg for 11 years. During that time I taught many different subjects including photography, animation, fine arts, sculpture, drawing and crafts courses at both the high school and intermediate levels. I also served as Department Head for five years, overseeing four separate schools, two intermediate and two high schools.

Because of East Stroudsburg's proximity to New York City and the fact that Pennsylvania’s taxes are so much lower than New Jersey and New York’s, people have continued to flock to the area. As a result, the schools have rapidly grown. When I graduated in



1990 the high school had roughly 800 students. In 15 years, the district grew to where they had to split into two high schools. When the new high school, ESHS North, opened in 2000, it had roughly 840 students. By the time I left in 2006 the school had over 1400 students.

Another anomaly of this area was the problem the district had with absentee parents. With New York City only being about 75 miles away, a growing number of parents were commuters. It wasn't rare to hear of parents who left at 4:30AM and returned around 8:00PM, or left Monday and came home on Friday. One of the main problems of this growing area is the lack of parental involvement and supervision. While the school had so much potential, its location created many problems.

Having said all of these negatives, I loved teaching there. I had wonderful support from the administration and was given a lot of freedom. Being a new school, the walls were empty. We started a crusade to change that. We created many different murals, mosaics and 3-D artworks for the school. When I started at ESHS North we had one and half art positions. When I left we had four. I primarily taught fine arts, including intro classes through to Art III/ IV. I had many talented students, including many who went on to art schools like MICA, SVA, Tyler, FIT, etc. During the final two years that I was there, I had two students selected for the PA Governor's School of the Arts. I miss my students dearly, but made a move to a more stable community in which to raise my two sons.

In November of 2006 my husband and I and our two sons moved to Jamestown, NY. Wanting to remain near family, we had moved from my hometown to my husband's. The small city of Jamestown, New York is a hidden treasure in the rust and snowbelt of our country. In western New York, where long winters, high taxes, and disappearing jobs have caused many people to flee for sunnier states, Jamestown still clings to its family roots and its population with

a fever. Growing up in a tourist area, I had never experienced such a feeling of intense community and tradition. Even in a city of about 30,000, everyone knows everyone else and their history, except for implants like me. While some parts of town are idyllic, other parts are downright destitute. The poverty rate is high, but even people who are well off don't seem to be as focused on material wealth as in some parts of the country. Most people do not drive flashy cars and own huge homes. There is crime, but most people look out for each other, say excuse me at stores and say hello with a smile. It is not uncommon to see fathers walking their kids to school and school concerts are always packed.

During the remainder of the 2006-2007 school year I was able to stay at home with my youngest son as well as explore a passion of mine; decorating cakes. I intended to stay home full time during the 2007-2008 school year also, but when I did a wedding cake for the Jamestown School District's Superintendent of Curriculum, she recommended me for a one day a week art position that was opening up. How could I turn it down? I spent the year teaching, on Tuesdays. I managed to keep busy being a mom, making cakes and acting as a visiting artist in classrooms through the local arts council. The following year there was a retirement in the art department, and with my son in kindergarten, I decided to return to full time teaching. This was both exciting and intimidating because it would be at the elementary level, which was foreign to me.

In 2008 I returned to full time teaching at two elementary schools, Lincoln and Love Elementary schools. They are two of the six elementary schools in the Jamestown City School District. Both schools have approximately 350 students from grades Pre-K through 4. I have wonderful rooms at both locations and feel that the teachers are very supportive of my program. Both schools are very dedicated to the success of their students. There are many programs put in

place to foster success in students who might otherwise slip through the cracks. They each have a free preschool program running for four and five year olds. Each school also hosts an independently run after school program that keeps children actively engaged until students are picked up at between 4:30 and 6:00.

Unfortunately, this is where the similarities between my two schools end. Lincoln Elementary is the most affluent and “highest scoring” school in the district, whereas Love Elementary is on the “bad side of town” and to put it mildly, has a challenging population well steeped in the cycles of poverty. The free lunch and breakfast program statistics (fig. 1) at the two schools clearly illustrate the large economic gap that exists between the two schools. At Lincoln Elementary 38% of the students qualify for the program, while at Love 90% qualify. This is even more interesting when you consider that the two schools are only about a mile and half apart.

Figure 1

	Lincoln Elementary	Love Elementary	District- Wide	State- Wide
Student to Teacher Ratio	1: 13.25	1: 8.7	1: 11.4	1:14.5
% Students on free lunch program	38%	90%	41%	12.6%
% American Indian	.5%	2.3%	1%	0%
% Asian/ Pacific Islander	.5%	.9%	1%	6%
% Hispanic	4%	22%	9%	19%
% African American	5%	22%	7%	20%
% White/ Caucasion students	90%	52%	83%	54%

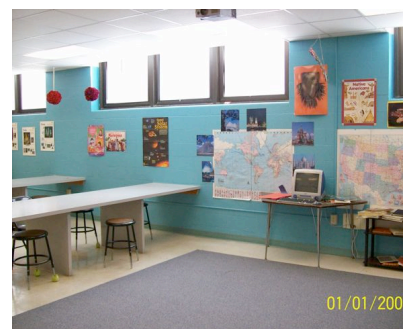
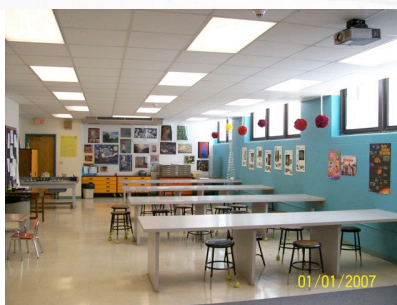
My experience at Lincoln Elementary has been idyllic. The students are very respectful and open to new ideas. At a district-wide inservice, the superintendent once referred to the students at Lincoln as the district's "little soldiers". He was referring to how whatever was asked of the students and staff, they did it and made it work well. He was also alluding to how the students' state test scores have continued to rise every year. While this sounds like they are little robots, this is not what I see in the classroom. Given any chance to express themselves, they run with it. They have great family support and the self-confidence to try new things. Any lesson I have tried with them they have eagerly received and I often get compliments from parents. I enjoy teaching at this school and love the relationship I have with students, staff and parents.

I wish that I could say that my experience at Love Elementary was as rewarding, but that would be disingenuous. Teaching at this school can be very trying. While the principal and teachers are extremely dedicated to the success and well being of the students, unfortunately the parental support is just not there. It is not rare that teachers bring extra clothes for students or do their hair in the morning. The teachers host a school-wide pajama drive for the kids before Christmas so that they are ensured to have a pair for Christmas Eve. I have never been made more aware of the adversities that poverty sets forth for students until I worked at this school. The skill set of students entering kindergarten is devastatingly low compared to the kindergarteners at Lincoln. Discipline is a much bigger issue at Love Elementary and has to be exhaustingly planned for. While I try to give students the ability to express themselves creatively, the discipline issues I face make it impossible for me to offer the same freedoms that I give my students at Lincoln. Unfortunately, I am not the same teacher at each school.

At both schools, I see students for 50-minute art classes. My first two years teaching at Lincoln and Love I saw students once a week. This year the student's schedule was changed and

I now see them once every eight days. In the past couple of years due to decreased state aid for the school district, many positions have been cut. In 2010, these cuts included one and a half elementary art positions. Each of the three remaining elementary art teachers is now solely in charge of two schools. As a result of the schedule change, we see students for much less time during the year. Whereas I previously saw students 38 times during the year, I now see students 23 times. I am hoping that once the economy bounces back we will be able to advocate for the schedule to be changed back and once again see the students more often. With a third less time I have had to take a serious look at what to keep and discard from my program. In the mean time the Mostly Online Master's Degree program has helped me streamline my curriculum into one that is more rewarding and personally meaningful for the students.

Lincoln Elementary School  
Jamestown, NY



Love Elementary School  
Jamestown, NY



CHAPTER 2:  
RESEARCH METHODS IN ART EDUCATION

## **Research Methods in Art Education**

### **Course Summary:**

The purpose of Research Methods in Art Education was to introduce students to methods needed to analyze and write about our experiences during our coursework with the Online Master's degree in Art Education program through The Ohio State University. We began by learning about qualitative research methods which researchers use to better understand what is occurring in their surroundings. As teachers doing this same style of research, we can gain a better understanding of what is happening in our classrooms and schools in order to improve certain situations. "Qualitative inquiry is a systematic process of describing, analyzing and interpreting insights discovered in everyday life" (Wolcott, 1994). Through its three stages of data collection, content analysis, and comparative analysis, researchers can try to create meaningful explanations of the activities they are witnessing.

We also learned about action research. Action research is that which is done in order to change current behaviors, whether it is societal behaviors or those that are happening in our classrooms. By following the steps of gathering and analyzing data, communicating outcomes and then taking action, teachers can improve certain aspects of their classroom (Stringer 5). Not only can the researched situations improve, but the process of asking for input from students can help make students feel like a valued member of the class. This can only help to create a more unified classroom community.

We then applied what we learned about conducting research to our own classrooms. Looking inward, we gathered and analyzed data regarding a specific teaching



experience of ours and learned the proper procedures for organizing and presenting this information in a well-structured research paper. The idea that I chose to research and write about during this class was using “Big Ideas” in a choice based classroom with elementary students.

## **Lesson and Unit Plan Development**

### **Research Project**

“Choosing Big Ideas and Choice Based Art Education”

#### **Introduction:**

Since taking Dr. Walker’s Issues in Art Education course, a question has echoed in my head. In the article "Real-world readings of art education: Things your professor never told you" by Olivia Gude, she posed the question: "When planning a beginning art curriculum, every teacher should ask "Recognizing that this may be the last art class my students will ever take, what do they need to know in order to begin a lifelong engagement with the art of the past and of the unfolding present?" So what lessons should I teach in order to give my students the most enjoyable and meaningful experience possible and keep them excited about the arts? Or should I actually be teaching less and letting my students have a more personally relevant artistic experience? I started reading more about Teaching for Artistic Behavior and choice based classrooms and decided that this might be a more rewarding direction to go in. Both of these practices work with the understanding that students gain a more authentic artistic experience when given the freedom to create artworks on their own, using media of their choice, and exploring ideas

that they personally find interesting. Especially with the ever increasing emphasis on test scores in schools today, do kids really need one more class where their creativity isn't fostered to it's fullest potential? Knowing that the answer was clearly no, I decided it was time for my teaching to change.

During my search for information on choice based art education, one case study I read was by Joseph S. Amorino of Kean University entitled "The Artistic Impetus Model: A Resource for Reawakening Artistic Expression in Adolescents." This study put forth the theory that with proper guidance, not total freedom, a choice based environment can be very successful for all levels of students. His study investigated whether or not adolescent students who have gone through an atrophy of artistic expression can be led through a pedagogical experience in order to successfully revive it. Amorino guided a group of self-proclaimed non-artistic students through a series of experiences following the Artistic Impetus Model (AIM) in order to reawaken their creative spirit. The AIM model consisted of the following experiences: Sensory stimulation, emotional response, expressive impulse and kinesthetic action with materials. The students worked together to experiment with different materials and develop ideas, but had the freedom to choose how to complete their own artworks. He discovered that if students are properly guided through the AIM methods they were indeed able to reawaken their ability to express themselves creatively. At the end of his study, he concluded that the same level of student engagement and meaningful art making would not have occurred in a classroom where there was either a traditional, linear or completely open method of teaching. He

also asserted that creating a more democratic learning environment could create an environment that fosters inner growth and revelation for the students.

Reading this gave me even more courage to develop my own choice based environment for my students. If he had taken students who had already lost their artistic confidence, what could I do with younger students who still have a raw excitement for creating art?

### **Student Experiences:**

Prior to this lesson I had introduced portraits to my third and fourth grade classes. We spent one 50-minute class looking at the proportions of the face and ways of drawing detailed parts like the eyes, nose, etc. As I demonstrated different parts, students looked at each other and in mirrors to examine what really happens on people's faces. They then spent the rest of the class creating a 9x 12 drawing of themselves in pencil. They did a fantastic job. However, except for obvious differences like length of hair, etc. they all looked very similar.

During the second class we discussed how different artists used portraits in their work. I introduced the Big Idea of Identity and showed students a Keynote presentation of portraits created by different artists. The slide show was split up into three sections that reflected the media that students would be able to choose to work with during this project. It showed different methods of creating a portrait by using drawing, painting or collage. During the presentation I emphasized how the artists chose to work in many different media, how they didn't have to be realistic to be considered good, and how they

all told you something about the person's identity, who they are. In one class a student asked, "If an artist could paint or draw a portrait realistically, why wouldn't they?" I thought this was a great question, and I was amazed at other students' responses to this:

Student #1: "Because they wanted to have fun."

Student #2: "Maybe they wanted someone to feel a certain way when they looked at the picture."

Student #3: "Maybe they were bored of making them look real."

I couldn't have stated it better myself and I couldn't have asked for a better lead into presenting the Big Idea of "Identity: Who I Am."

After discussing the slides I asked them to close their eyes and start to think about how they were going to create an artwork about themselves. I reminded them that they would be making an artwork that showed something about their identity. It should show "who they are." I asked them to close their eyes and visualize different things about themselves; what they like to do after school, what colors they like best, if they could go anywhere, where would they be, what are they proud of about themselves, etc. Most importantly I asked them to think of what made them different than everyone else in the room. What was it that made them THEM and not someone else? I then asked them to try to picture an artwork about them. What would they use to create it, drawing, painting or collage? After this they chose one of the three stations to work at and went to sit down.

Once they were in their new seats, they had two choices: to continue adding onto

the drawing that they had started the previous week or to work on a new piece of paper (9x12 or 12x 18). As students got to work on preliminary drawings, I went to the individual stations and covered rules and hints that would help them during this project. Some of the things I mentioned were collage techniques, rules for getting paint, using and cleaning palettes, how to mix flesh tones with paint, etc. Then they got into their projects.

They worked on their portraits for two additional 50-minute classes. As they finished their works, they had the options of creating another portrait or an artwork that showed their favorite style of artwork, or working in their sketchbook. The students surprisingly were pretty equally divided on what activity they chose to do while waiting for others to finish their portraits. None of them appeared to be bored or wandering around searching for something to do. Actually, they seemed to be on a mission. As a lead into our next project, which will be about their favorite place, I introduced a three dimensional station on the last day of work on the portraits. The “construction station” contained scraps and blocks of wood I had been given by a woodworker. They loved this option, and several groups of students decided on their own to design things like a city or playground where individuals made their own small part of the whole project.

At the end of the third 50-minute class I asked the classroom teachers if they would mind having the students fill out a paper about their portraits. Being that the project had been stretched to cover eight weeks already, I wanted to be able to move on to a new project the next class. Spending even 15-20 minutes of class writing would

mean that they would hardly have time to do artwork. I do think that it is important to have students reflect on and show all of the thought that went into their artwork. On this paper I asked the students to name their work, list the Big Idea that we covered, tell the story behind their artwork and to evaluate their work and list what they learned during the project. The teachers were actually excited about having the students write about their artwork and some of them said that they enjoyed reading about the little things that students had included in their work. I think it will be interesting for parents to read also. I plan on displaying the portraits along with their writings in the main lobby of the school and the students are excited.

**Student Work****Big Idea: Identity**  
**“Who I Am”**

Vanessa- Third grade- She loves her swim lessons. She also made sure to point out that the flowers and stars at the neckline are the exact pattern that she has on her bathing suit.



William- Third grade- A very shy, but happy boy. His portrait amazingly reminds me of him. He was extremely proud of this and loved how it “looked like a cartoon character” of him.



Isaiah- Fourth grade. He had trouble mixing flesh tones, and ended up “going with it” to create an abstract portrait. I especially like the eyes, mouth and the square that he added around his head.



Emma- Third grade: Was ecstatic when she came up with the idea to hide behind flowers. The flowers are from a wallpaper book. She is so proud of this work.



Brianna- Fourth grade. She saw this idea on the Keynote presentation and had to do it. Students had a great time working with collage.



Mai Wen- Fourth grade. Very talented artistically. Really enjoyed the process of working with collage. She also learned how to mix flesh tones just using the common 8 color sets of watercolor. She was thrilled about being able to do that.



Daniel- Third Grade. Had a blast doing this drawing. The two figures in the distance are fighting with light sabers and the one's hair is taking over everything and "Becoming one with" Daniel's head.



Masen- Third Grade. Drew his lizard tank with heat lamps warming his lizard.



Mya- third grade, specil ed. I loved the personality of this portrait. This is exactly what her personality is like. She did about five portraits during the three days.





Kailiah- third grade, special ed. She was especially proud of her hair and the flower ears. She did have a lot of help from her aid, but the ideas were ALL HER!

**Gathering Student Feedback:**

Originally, I had planned on interviewing only three students from one of my fourth grade classes regarding working with the choice based environment compared the more linear projects we had done in the past. However, once I began the interviews, they went very smoothly and students were begging to be interviewed. As a result I ended up interviewing about ten students but chose the four who I felt had the most interesting responses to note in my research.

Beck: A gifted, but not artistically enthusiastic student with a great sense of humor.

Alex: An artistically gifted student who is has a quiet confidence

Abby: A student who always has a smile and enjoys art, but is generally shy.

Kayla: A gifted student with a troubled home life who has many behavioral problems and is generally very moody.

I asked them several questions regarding working with Big Ideas and working in a Choice Based classroom. The questions that I asked included but were not limited to:

- Tell me how we usually go through art projects in this class.
- What do you like about working this way?
- What do you not like about working this way?

On this last project we were working in what people call a choice based classroom. This is where you are able to decide how you worked on your artwork instead of me telling you exactly what to do.

- Can you tell me how went through this last project in class?
- What do you like about working this way?
- What do you not like about working this way?
- Which way of working do you prefer?
- If you were in charge of how the art room was run, how would you run it?
- Would you add any other “art stations”? If so, what would you add?

**Student Reactions:**

By introducing the "Big Idea of Identity" to my students and asking them to show, “Who they are,” in an artwork of their own design, students made many personal connections to their work. These strong connections would not have been made if they all had simply completed self-portraits in the style of my choosing. Students were very involved in the process of making art during this project because they were able to make all of the choices. For example, choosing what medium to be used and what they would show about themselves, etc. The more the students personalized their works, the more enthusiastic they became. By the third class, they entered the room and just wanted to get to work. One student, Kayla, who was normally combative with other students and very moody, poured herself into her work over the three class periods we spent on these projects and proclaimed that her drawing was the best artwork she had ever done. When she said this, my heart swelled. She meant it. Then I began thinking and came to the

conclusion that it made perfect sense. Why would a student always enjoy creating what I thought was good art? When given the opportunity to create artwork that was truly personal, why wouldn't they prefer that? A fourth grader named Beck summed his reaction to working with Big Ideas and a choice based environment best when he said, "You got to pick to do something about you, do whatever you want. It made it even more interesting."

This was my students' first experience with a choice based environment in an art room. While some of them did struggle to figure out exactly how they wanted to work and what they wanted to show in their project, they all adjusted just fine and almost all of them preferred working this way compared to our old classroom style of all creating very similar projects based on my ideas. Working in a choice based environment also had many personal implications for the students. Having the option of working at the painting, drawing, or collage stations allowed them to gravitate towards a media that they felt comfortable working with or were curious to learn about. Abby, a fourth grader, said, "You don't have to DO a certain thing, you can do what you want." While this sounds exciting, in the beginning I think it was a little overwhelming for some students. Another fourth grader, Alex, said that, "At first I thought you were being mean by not telling us what to do, but then I figured out that you really meant we could do whatever we wanted. I love it now." Like many artists, when given complete freedom to create what they want, some students struggled. Beck stated, "Sometimes when you don't tell

us exactly what to do, we can get confused. But, I like working this way because it's fun and we can do it how WE want."

The choice based environment also had some effects on the classes as a group. Learning to work in a different environment than they were accustomed to mean that students also had to adjust to new social situations. Some changes were positive. In the past students had assigned seats. In a choice based environment, students could choose what art station they wanted to sit at and as a result there was a lot more intermingling of students. Abby said that she enjoyed sitting next to people she didn't normally get to talk to. She also said "You get to share creative ideas with each other. It's fun to let your imagination go crazy and talk about funny ideas." And Alex said, "We could all choose to do different things. It was fun to see what different people chose to do." Not everything was so positive though. As students intermingled more, some awkward situations could arise. Beck noted that "I wouldn't like it if there was someone that said you should use this, and you don't want to, but you don't want to be mean and tell them you don't want to use it." Kayla said, "Before, I sat with two other people and I knew what they would say, now I'm not sure who is going to be next to me and what they will say about my art." I hadn't thought about how new social situations could be stressful for some students.

### **Teacher Reactions:**

When I began planning research on "Big Ideas and a Choice Based Environment," I expected that the transition would be quite a bit to get used to for the students. I didn't

know how much the experience would affect me as a teacher. There were moments in some classes when I didn't think that I should continue. Most notably, there is a class where I have 12 special education students mainstreamed into a class of 24. Having a class of thirty-six third graders adjusting to the new situation of choosing what to do in a personal art work, choosing and moving to a new art station to work in and most stressful of all, getting paint on their own was at times overwhelming. I spoke to the two aides who come into the room with the special education students and asked their opinion of what was going on. Expecting the worst, surprisingly, they were positive. They said that the students hardly ever get to choose what they get to do and that they were enjoying it. As the students adjusted to the new situation over a couple classes, my job seemed to get less stressful. They figured out where they would be sitting, what they needed to get, and how to do it. The chaos of the beginning of class seemed to ease up and students got to work quicker with each consecutive class. I also learned to adjust what I put out and how I organized the room. I also posted rules of cleaning up and this made things run much easier at the end of class.

Another thing that surprised me was my reaction to the situation. When I set out on this experiment, I did so because I wanted to give students an experience that I think is being eliminated from their general education. As testing becomes more valued in our schools and budgets are tightened, the opportunities for students to explore, experiment and express themselves happen less and less. I wanted to give them an environment to have fun in and explore their ideas. I was surprised then that I found it difficult to really let go of the reins. I know that it was appropriate to set more classroom guidelines for

clean up and studio time procedures. However, I found it difficult to draw a line of when to stop guiding their projects. Sometimes it was hard to bite my tongue and not offer too many suggestions. I found myself asking, “Is it better to have a higher quality of work by MY standards, or for the students to enjoy the process and create art on their own terms? The answer was obviously choice two, but then I wondered what parents would think. Would they judge me because their child’s artwork “wasn’t as good” when judged by adult standards, or would they appreciate the fact that their students got a chance to express themselves more? I am hoping that by adding the final step of having students write about their artwork, the students’ excitement about their new experiences will transfer to their parents.

**Research Conclusions:**

I was happily surprised with the students’ positive reaction to working with Big Ideas and a choice based environment. Even in just three classes, they seem more electrified and excited to work. They have also picked up on the procedures of working like this very quickly and seem to be act more independently and responsibly in regards to getting started on their projects and cleaning up after themselves.

I still have questions regarding how far to go with a choice based classroom. I have only done this so far with my third and fourth classes at my “good” school. I know my second graders at this school would also love to work like this, but I am struggling with whether it is appropriate for me to do with kindergarten and first grade students. Right now I feel it is better for me to work on basic art skills to raise student’s confidence

and work on their fine motor skills. I also wonder if this type of environment would be successful in my more challenging school. Would it just end of being total chaos or would the students thrive in an environment which challenged them to express themselves and explore ideas? By first working with students that are easier to let explore in a freer environment, I will hopefully learn how to best present Big Ideas in a choice based classroom to my more challenging student population.

### **How This Course Affected My Classroom and Teaching**

The idea that I found most beneficial about this course was simply the idea of conducting a researching project within my classroom. To honestly sit down and devise a plan to analyze a certain aspect of your classroom or teaching takes dedication. Asking for honest feedback from your students requires humility. It makes you take an honest look at what is really working and what is not. Simply by going through the action of research, it makes you more dedicated to the success of your classroom and students. The act of identifying a problem and changing classroom practices to fix it, serves the students better.

Conducting the research project that I created for this course has completely changed the direction and environment of my classroom. I plan to continue to use big ideas and a choice based environment in as many classes as I possibly can. I think the opportunity for students to express themselves creatively has been both enjoyable and rewarding for the students. I am also hoping to be able to do further research on ways of



organizing my room and classroom procedures so that I may successfully offer this opportunity in my more difficult school.

By taking Research Methods in Art Education I feel that I have broken through into a new phase of my teaching career, one where the success of my class does not fall solely on my shoulders. When I taught high school I knew that students could handle a wider range of freedom within the artroom. However, I underestimated elementary students when I thought that they would not be able to handle a choice based environment. This course and the guidelines it provided in conducting a research project gave me the courage and direction to explore this idea in my school. I am thankful for the confidence it gave me in choosing to explore this new direction.

CHAPTER 3:  
TEACHING MEANING IN ARTMAKING

### **Teaching Meaning in Artmaking**

#### **Course Summary:**

Having received my certification in art education in the 1990's my lessons have always followed the Discipline Based Art Education of DBAE model. This is where art lessons are balanced between the curricular areas of as art history, production, aesthetics, and criticism. While addressing these issues in student art is still very important, using only these elements creates a glaring shortcoming in the potential of an art curriculum. It is imperative that students also should learn to express themselves meaningfully through their art. During Dr. Walker's course "Teaching Meaning in Artmaking" we continued to explore the idea of using Big Ideas in our classrooms as well as in our personal artwork in order to make the artmaking process a much more personally meaningful endeavor.

Big Ideas are "broad, umbrella-like ideas that guide students in understanding what it means to be human, to live alongside others and in the natural world". (Stewart and Walker, 2001, p23) These are ideas that are common themes in artists' works, but are expressed in a limitless variety of ways. Big Ideas can be universal themes such as identity, power, alienation, human emotions, nature or culture. They offer a broad idea for students to branch off of in a self-determined direction. If these expressions are legitimately self-determined, they are bound to be more personally meaningful and profound. When students are given the technical tools to be confident and the opportunity to find their own artistic voice, their art education is inevitably bound to be more memorable and rewarding. Artist, Catherine Nash expressed this idea when she stated "When you pursue artistic expression and give yourself the gift of time to create, you

are centering yourself and giving your life a richer level of meaning that expands to other aspects of your life. Being creative gives you a tremendous reason for being.”

Practicing Big Ideas in an art classroom does not mean that students are given free reign to just make whatever projects they please. When using Big Ideas, students are guided through the processes of Introduction of the Big Idea, problem solving, building a knowledge base, making personal connections, creating boundaries, and exploring possible ways of working. While being led through the many steps of the artistic process, they gain an understanding of the ways many different artists work. Artmaking is not always created as a result of a “lightning strike of inspiration.” It is a process. During “Teaching Meaning in Artwork,” we were guided through the artmaking process using Big Ideas. We documented our artmaking journey and I exited the course with a deeper understanding of being an art student again and thus, how to make my lessons as well as my personal artwork more personally meaningful. The following is a brief summary of my Big Idea exploration during the course as well an example of a lesson that I have developed for my students using this model of art education.

### **My Personal Big Idea Exploration**

“It doesn't matter if others can read the meaning, but it's fun to discover your own psyche tapping you on the shoulder.” (Dianne Harrison)

#### **Developing My Big Idea:**

Trying to determine the topic for my Big Idea was a long and drawn out struggle. Knowing that I wanted to make artwork that focused on important people in my life, I originally brainstormed ideas like Memory, Identity, Life and Death, Family, Rituals and Relationships. Traditionally, my artwork has been about composition and technique more than meaning. (fig 1

and 2), but I finally convinced myself that I had to step out of my comfort zone for this class. I chose a topic that has always been on my mind, but had never really felt comfortable showing in my art. I settled on the Idea of Identity: How do objects come to signify people in our lives? Why is it that when we see a certain object it makes us think of certain people?

I was excited about this decision and felt that even though it was not necessarily in my comfort zone, I would be pushing my art to a deeper level. Unfortunately, during the same time period, several of my close family members passed away. It is amazing to discover how certain things could trigger memories of them. These would range from objects that were very important to them, to soup or candies that they liked. I also found smells like certain flowers or foods could immediately induce memories of these people. If this is how our identity lives on, as other peoples' memories, it makes you wonder what you will be remembered for.

We were told to list key concepts and questions related to our art. Mine were as follows:

**Big Idea:**

Identity

**Key Concepts:**

Identity can sometimes be gained through objects

Identity is about self compared to other's perceptions

Identity can last beyond death as other's relate familiar object to you.

Identity is about memories

Identity can be about reinvention

Identity can last as long as someone is around that remembers you.

Identity is about finding your role in your family tree

Identity is about what you do, not what you own

**Questions:**

When does our identity cease to exist?

Why do objects come to symbolize a person's identity?

What objects have come to identify important people in our lives?

In what ways is it right or wrong to let objects come to symbolize your identity?

We were also asked to look at oppositions in our artwork to consider creating even deeper meaning. The oppositions that I came up with regarding my Big Idea included remembered vs. forgotten, peaceful vs. tumultuous, guilt vs. freedom, and actions vs. intentions. I found that thinking of oppositions actually opened up many other doors for additional artworks. By looking at oppositions, I started to consider new ideas of ways to visualize complex identities of people I love.

**Building a Knowledge Base:**

While there are many ways of building a knowledge base, the strategies that I used for my research were: observation from everyday life along with self-knowledge and research of artists and cultures. While the first two are very evident in my artworks, the last one I found most rewarding in giving me direction. I love to graze the Internet looking for new artists and ideas for projects in school. I found the artwork of John Malloy and was very drawn to it. I love the combination of graphic and painterly qualities of his illustrations. In select areas, his illustrations use pen and ink techniques that remind me of Talous Latrec. Although I have never especially liked Latrec's prints, this graphic quality combined with a painterly, dreamlike feel to Malloy's figures are intriguing to me. I also enjoy how his imagery is not just a single scene, but also a compilation of different images and text to create an overall collage-like work. I think this

appeals to me because he is not “Hitting you over the head” with his message, but drawing you in deeper in order to interpret his meaning with a little investigation.

In reading interviews of Malloy, I also learned of artists that influence him. One artist that I particularly liked was the graphite and mixed media illustrations of James Jean I love the fact that he uses large graphite drawings as the basis of his work and especially enjoyed his “Prada 1” and “Prada 2”, large mixed media murals which are 17’ x 200’ long. I always enjoy when an artist can work extremely larger and still retain energy in their mark making. I think that this would be a wonderfully liberating way to work in the future. Finding the artwork of John Malloy was very inspirational. Seeing his artwork opened my mind a bit and allowed me to see how I could transform my work into a more illustrative style. Researching and finding contemporary artists was an enjoyable and inspiring part of my Big Idea project.

### **Creating My Artwork:**

Completing the drawing commands, contextualizing and play exercises did help to create a more concrete idea in my head of what it was that I wanted to make. After beginning my first work I decided to change directions. At first I was going to show how an object like a gardenia could trigger memories of different people and places. (fig 3 and 4) After beginning my drawing it occurred to me that my grandmother, who recently passed away, was more important to me than a flower. So I concentrated on her. I ended up concentrating on one person in each work.

One of the most rewarding things I ended up doing was working side by side with my youngest son who is five. He loved being able to work on the other side of the easel from me. He would ask immediately to get to work painting right after school, and was happy working for hours. He said he liked painting "with me and the music." Only one time did it end up being too difficult. He got frustrated because he couldn't paint things "the way they really look." We tried

to work it out, but that got him even more frustrated. So we took a break. Unfortunately, he did a little work on my first painting. I caught it pretty quickly, but he had already done a little damage to my grandmother's one eye. For a while I was considering painting one of the doily designs on it, but I didn't think it would look right, so I darkened that side of the face. I tried to keep my frustration from showing, but the only thing that saved me was when he told me "Mommy don't get upset, you're doing your best." I had to smile, that put it all in perspective.

By following the Big Idea model I know that I delved deeper into my own psyche and artwork than I normally would have if I had been just told to create a series of artworks about anything. I remember a drawing professor in college who told us to do just that and it was overwhelming. I remember being so upset wondering what should I draw, how big should I work, how many drawings should I create, and what should they be about? With the Big Idea model being so personally driven, each artwork seemed to naturally lead to a new one. It is a process that seems much more natural and fulfilling.



### Images from My Big Idea Project

#### Examples of my artwork before Big Ideas:



Fig. 1 *Written on a Lake*, Charcoal, 4'x4'



Fig. 2 *Untitled*, Charcoal 4'x4'

#### Some Preliminary Sketches and Play techniques:

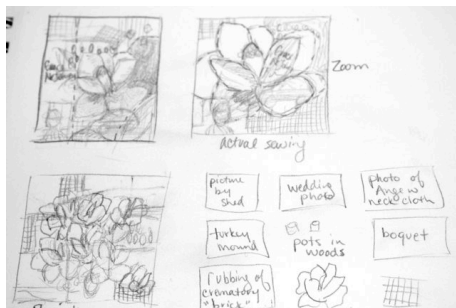


Fig. 3 Preliminary sketches



Fig. 4 Samples of play techniques

#### Examples of my artwork using Big Ideas:



Fig. 5 *Grace*, Watercolor, acrylic and ink, 18x24



Fig. 6 *Clinging*, Watercolor, Acrylic, 18x24

## **Lesson and Unit Plan Development**

### **Big Idea: Place and Identity “My Favorite Place”**

#### **Student Experiences:**

During this past year, I began experimenting with Big Ideas in a choice based classroom environment. As I documented in my paper regarding Dr. Hutzler's Research Methods class, my third and fourth grade classes at Lincoln Elementary School in Jamestown, NY started the second half of the year working in this environment. As in the real artworld, students in my classroom were addressing a single issue or Big Idea in art, and were able to choose different materials which with work and determine the direction their artwork should go.

The first Big Idea that they used in their new choice based environment was “Identity: Who I Am.” Students completed an artwork which told things about themselves through a self portrait. We had watched a Keynote presentation on self portraits and discussed many different ways that artists choose to work. Just because many artists create self portraits, doesn't mean that they all end up looking the same. Since it was the students' first time working in stations in my room, I kept it simple by giving them the option of working at a painting, drawing or collage area.

The lesson went well enough that I decided to begin a second lesson using a choice based classroom. This time we would be using the Big Idea of Place and Identity: My Favorite Place. I began their knowledge building by showing them a Keynote presentation explaining the idea of place in art and showing examples of how different artists use this idea in their artwork. We discussed the artwork of several artists including Pepon Osorio, Do-Ho Suh, and Shahzia Sikander.

I then helped them to develop their personal connections to the project. I led students through a visualization exercise, having them picture their favorite place. I told them that their place could be a place that they go to every day, one that they used to go to and no longer exists, or maybe somewhere that they hope to go to one day. During this exercise I asked them to visualize and pretend they were looking around this place. What is it that they saw? Who is there? What objects are there? Is it indoors or outdoors? I informed them that they were able to create their artwork at the drawing, painting and collage stations like on the previous project or choose to work at a new “Construction Station.” Here, students could choose to build their favorite places three dimensionally. This station included many cardboard boxes that we got from the cafeteria and janitor, a huge box of material that used to belong to my grandmother and a box of wood scraps from a relative who is a carpenter. They moved to their new station and then filled out a worksheet to do brainstorming and fingernail sketches. Once they were finished with their planning sheet they could begin to work.

Most students decided to build their favorite places. Some of the places that students decided to depict included their rooms, amusement parks, their grandparents’ house, New York City, the Biltmore mansion, an indoor amusement park, a dinosaur cave, a river, and a computer store. The list goes on and on. Everyone worked for approximately 3 to 4, 50-minute classes. Some students decided that they also wanted to work on their projects at home. A two-week spring vacaion also gave many students a little extra time to work on them. I found that the students who took their projects home also worked on them with their parents. This was an exciting prospect that I hadn’t considered. The lesson finished off strongly and most students enjoyed themselves immensely. I would definitely repeat this lesson again.

**Student Reactions:**

Most students had an overwhelmingly positive strong reaction to this lesson. They were enthusiastic and excited to be building something. Students who chose to draw or paint were very self directed. I had many students comment on how much fun they had just being able to build what they wanted. And, of course, since the subject matter was their choosing too, they were very invested in the process. Every day I would have students stopping by to borrow things to work on their projects at home. They would also deliver their projects back to the classroom with a palatable sense of pride. Teachers and parents were constantly coming up to me and telling me how excited the kids were about their project and how they couldn't wait for art. I was able to display the projects in the classroom while they were in progress and younger students were always begging to be able to do them too. Several students who finished early asked if they could make another one and, of course, I said yes.

I can only think of two students who did not react well to this project. One of them named Trenton shocked me. He is very awkward in most other areas of school and social life, but is extremely artistically gifted. He is the kind of student who usually goes overboard with detail and uses amazingly creative ideas. On this project he said that he learned absolutely nothing and didn't want to finish his project. It broke my heart since I was excitedly waiting to see what he was going to come up with. Unfortunately, he wasn't willing to tell me why he didn't like it and I wasn't able to help him out. I just hope that the next project is more up his alley again.

**Teacher Reactions:**

The many positive aspects to this project clearly outweigh the few negative. One positive aspect of the lesson was the opportunity for students to express their personal ideas. No two projects looked alike. As they worked, most had a clear goal as to what they wanted their artwork to look like and never wavered from it. Whether or not it was realistic or abstract, to them it seemed to be as obvious as day what this block of wood represented or what their glitter was supposed to be. While I loved most of them, I especially enjoyed the ones that were abstract. I enjoyed when students explained what all of the different items that they had made were. One project in particular was by a student named Dylan. In his artwork, "By the River," he used a rather small box. Leaving the flaps of the box on he folded them inward and framed a very abstract scene of a river bed. He used blue lace for the water, had a wooden boat with a rainbow material sail and showed patches of grass and islands scattered around the scene. It was very meaningful to him because this is where his uncle and his family spend most of their summer. His uncle also helped him with his project. I guarantee this was treasured time spent together and a project they won't soon forget.

While most of my reactions to this project are positive, I do a few negative things to point out. Like in my research project for Dr. Hutzell's class, some of the classes who participated in this lesson were a little more chaotic than normal. Eventhough students were doing what they were supposed to be doing, the fact that they needed to move around the room more to get certain supplies created an environment which sometimes made me a little nervous. One class in particular, which has 24 regular education and 12 special education students, always seemed to be just shy of total chaos. I couldn't ask for better behaved students, but with 36 kids and three adults, the class could be a little unnerving. Also, with so many different project ideas happening

students seemed to need assistance more often. Unlike when we all worked on the same project, using the same supplies and following the same directions, students needed more individual attention. Sometimes it was exhausting and I felt that in some classes I had talked to the same couple of students the entire time, ignoring certain others who were not as demanding of my attention. If I continue a choice based atmosphere, I have to figure out how to prevent this.



**Student Works from Big Idea Project: Place/ Identity**  
**“My Favorite Place”**



Harry- My Room



Deana- Walking my Dog



Meri- The Biltmore Mansion



Savannah- Midway Park



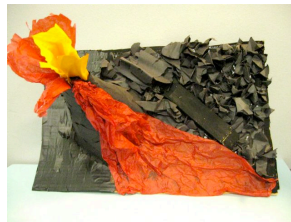
Madison- Splash Lagoon



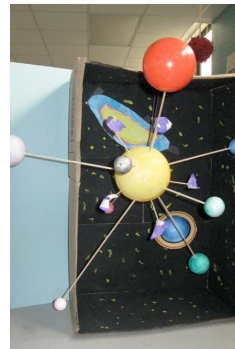
Alexis- Underwater World



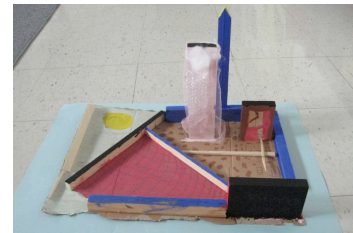
Dylan- By the River



Cooper- Diamond Head  
Volcano



Allyson- My View  
of Space



Christine- New York City

### **How this course affected my teaching**

This course changed my teaching tremendously. Having been a high school teacher for 11 years before moving and entering into an elementary position, I originally thought that using Big Ideas in an elementary setting would be too complex. I was so wrong and to the contrary have found that every time I include them in a lesson, my students are enthusiastically applying their creative ideas. Elementary students are not afraid to create an idea that doesn't quite make sense to everyone else or isn't a monumental statement, they just enjoy creating. Where as high school students might labor over finding an idea that is perfectly world changing or showing their teenage angst, elementary students are happy showing a squirrel jumping off of a building and turning into a Super Duck to show the idea of transformation. After three years of teaching younger students, I have adjusted to this freedom of imagination and using Big Ideas helps me create lessons that allow my students achieve their creative potential.

I like that the Big Idea model still includes much of the structure of Discipline Based Art Education and meshes it with the freedom of the Creative Self-Expression movement. I agree that it is very important and educationally sound to introduce students to media and techniques in art as well as opening their eyes to the work of individual artists and cultures. Without this knowledge base, free expression might not ever develop into confident and meaningful artmaking. Both movements in art education have their benefits, but it is when the two are combined that a complete and relevant art education occurs.

I am finding that students really do enjoy all of the parts of the Big Idea artmaking process. It has become a natural part of our curriculum in third and fourth grade to begin a project with a slide show that presents a Big Idea topic and shows examples of how different artists address this topic in their artwork. They freely discuss the ways that artists interpret these



ideas differently and take them into consideration when deciding what to do for their own work. “Wow!” and “That is SO COOL!” are commonly heard when they see new artists and that makes me so fulfilled as a teacher.

Students also seem to enjoy the visualization and brainstorming of personal connections for their projects. After a slide show introducing a topic I generally have students go through a visualization process. They are asked to picture things that they have personally experienced trying to jump start ideas for their own artworks. They don’t seem to have a hard time doing this. We only spend about 5 or so minutes picturing things in their imaginations, but at the end when I ask them to raise their hands if they have a picture in their heads of what they want to make, I love to watch hand after hand be raised. By going through this process, it seems that ideas for their artwork naturally come about and are truly personal creations.

I am finding that the more personally relevant the lesson is to the students, the more they are willing to invest in the process, and the more they enjoy themselves and prouder they become of their results. I try to include Big Ideas in as many projects as possible. While I only documented the lesson “My Favorite Place” in this paper, there are many other Big Idea lessons that I have done since being introduced to this model of art education. A favorite of mine, as well as the students, was an Aboriginal Animal project that addressed the Big Idea of dreams. In this project students had to picture an animal that has a similar personal traits as them and create an Aboriginal Dream drawing using them. Another Big Idea project that the students enjoyed was one that focused on the Big Idea of “Transformation”. In conjunction with a science unit on plants, my fourth grade classes at Love Elementary planted daffodil and tulip bulbs in the fall. We waited and counted down to when they would come up in the spring. When they bloomed, students first learned how to draw daffodils and tulips and then created a freer artwork on their

interpretation of the theme “transformations”. The results spanned from a comic book style representation of the cycle of a bulb turning into a flower, to a tree that showed all of the different seasons, to a girl changing from a baby to eventually being a mother.

It isn’t often that a pedagogical method arises that truly has the ability to affect both teacher and student. In the case of implementing Big Ideas into my curriculum, this is “spot on.” This style of teaching, which I had to allow myself to adjust and adapt to, has reinvigorated me as a professional. Drawing from the energy and creativity of my students has allowed me to reach further and challenge myself to teach to my utmost. In conclusion, this has been one of my biggest “Aha!” moments in my fourteen plus years teaching and I look forward to seeing where it will take my students and me both personally and professionally.

CHAPTER 4:  
CONCLUSION

As a result of my experiences with the online masters program, many things have changed in my understandings about teaching art. It is interesting that I entered the online program just as I was beginning to make a large transformation from teaching high school to teaching elementary. I remember thinking that since the students were so young, some four or five years old, that I would never be able to implement the ideas that we were being introduced to in the program. As we were asked to bring ideas from the class to our students, I found that they were more than capable of understanding these new ideas and in fact were excited about being more challenged and given more of a role in their education. Albert Einstein was credited with saying, "Another word for creativity is courage." In the last three years I have discovered that elementary students are by their very nature curious and creative. They haven't yet lost the courage to think creatively and make artwork freely. By making me experiment with many ideas, including various aspects of art criticism, creating meaningful curriculum and methods of evaluations, this program has helped me discover the amazing capabilities of young students much quicker than I would have on my own.

One experience that opened my eyes was during the course "Teaching Art Criticism". Dr. Barrett had us design a critique that asked students to lead a critique of their artwork. We were told to structure the critique so that the conversation had minimal input from us as the teacher. Knowing how daunting some critiques could be in the past with my lower level high school art classes, I did not go into this critique with high aspirations. The fourth grade class I chose to work with not only proved me wrong, but had a great time analyzing and creating interpretations of their classmates Aboriginal dream drawings. By stating what I expected of them before the critique and simply having five or six questions prepared, things went smoothly and were very meaningful. Students alternated as the discussion leader and enjoyed the process immensely.

The conversation didn't just rotate around "What do like? What could the artist do differently?" They enjoyed questions that asked them to interpret each other's work and were not afraid to offer silly stories to go along with their classmate's art. I also learned that elementary students are more than capable of having a fun and rewarding critique of their own work. As a result of this project I have been conducting more critiques whenever time allows it.

Another way the online program changed my understandings of art teaching is by opening my eyes to a more meaningful curriculum. Students have clearly enjoyed projects more when they have more personal input. Practices we learned in "Teaching Meaning in Artwork," "Designing Meaningful Curriculum" and "Research Methods in Art Education" have given me the confidence to loosen the reigns a bit and allow students to have creative control over their projects. As I documented in the essays of this portfolio, I have chosen to implement more lessons that allow students the freedom to react to a general idea with their personal interpretation and artistic vision. In the first several courses of this program we were introduced to using Big Ideas in our curriculum. When I first started out, I used Big Ideas for individual lessons. They have now become a huge part of my curriculum with my second, third and fourth grade students. Especially at Lincoln Elementary where I have begun to work with a choice based classroom, Big Ideas are a starting point for almost every unit. Students understand that they will start a new unit by learning about a new Big Idea and how contemporary artists apply this theme to their artwork. They will then get the chance to express their own interpretation of this idea. It is becoming second nature to them. At my other school, where discipline is an ongoing concern, they still enjoy the freedom of selecting the ideas they will depict in their works, they just don't have the choice of media to use.

While students have gained more freedom of expression in my art room, they remain accountable for their behavior and have become increasingly accountable for their work and progress through the use of process-folios. Before taking Dr. Parson's class, "Assessment of Student Art," in my mind, assessments were made as a way to validate art. If students didn't get a grade on a project, then how were we to justify a grade on their report card? Consequently, I would keep assessment criteria simple so that it wouldn't take up a lot of my time, allowing me to concentrate on improving the students' experience of artmaking in my classroom. I never stopped to think of how assessment techniques could play a huge part in making more sense of artmaking and as a result make the experience more meaningful to the students. During this course, we read about teaching "backwards" or starting with the end goal of our lesson as the focus. I realized how this could really help students get more out of a lesson. By making sure that every part of a lesson is aligned with what we want the students to get out of it in the end, we make sure that a lesson flows smoothly for the students as they passed from an introduction, to production, and finally to their final reflections. As a result of having smoother transitions between different stages of the lesson, key ideas are repeatedly reinforced and students make more of a connection to a lesson's relevance. I remember while taking "Assessment of Student Art," thinking how my rubrics were more successful when I hung them up around the room during projects, and how this focused students' attention onto what I was looking for from them. But this generally just focused them more on art techniques and project requirements. Once we discussed the articles "The Benefits of Portfolios" by Danielson and Abrutyn and "Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and the Portfolio" by Ray Wilkins I became inspired to use portfolios and process-folios in my elementary assignment. I continue to do so and they have not only

become a great way to evaluate student understanding but have also been a wonderful way to create a stronger connection between myself, students and parents.

I plan to continue to use all of the ideas in my art teaching as well as many others that I have encountered during the online program at OSU. Not only will they benefit my students, but they benefit me as an artist and teacher. I especially like that the program ended with the course “Research Methods in Art Education.” It seems to have given me a workable structure with which to make further Action Research projects in my classrooms. I would love to continue to explore ways of bringing the freedoms of Big Issues combined with a choice based environment in my tougher school. I would be interested in finding other teachers that have used these practices with inner city populations. I would also like to develop my use of process-folios to encompass all of the work done in this freer environment. Now that I have worked through several units working with these practices, I think using a method of evaluation that brings consistency and constant goal setting to students would be very beneficial.

I still have many questions about my teaching, the largest being how can I bring the experiences of my two schools closer together in depth and success? I feel that I am very successful in one school, but not as much at the other. While I know that the discipline problems I face at my more challenging school are a school-wide issue, I wish there was some way to overcome them in my classroom so that they could achieve more. Would making the curriculum even more about student self reflection reduce the amount of friction between students? Would it be more beneficial for them to learn to be better listeners, direction followers, and skilled workers? Which skills would benefit them more in life and give them more pride? While I know that I need to work on younger students’ basic skills at this school like cutting, drawing and painting, would older students be more proud of more “complete” looking projects or just

being able to express their own ideas? This is a tough question to gage since the students at this school are very tough on themselves and are not as confident when it comes to artmaking.

Reflecting on these questions is something that I constantly do. I am hoping that through experimentation, I will find the answers and create a program that best serves all of my students.

I am amazed to look back at all of the changes the online program has helped me to make as an elementary art teacher. The program has given me the resources and motivation to move my curriculum into one that I hope students will benefit from personally. One surprising resource that the program has given me is the other teachers in my cohort. In addition to the courses, I have enjoyed getting to know other art teachers that are facing the same issues and concerns as me. Just as my fellow classmates, who come from a variety of backgrounds and locales, sometimes our future paths are uncertain. While I know not every student will follow a path into a career in art, I hope that the more meaningful and thought provoking lessons that we now cover will help to make them more confident and creative young people, ready for their future.



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